RETHINKING LI KAIXIAN’S EDITORSHIP OF
REVISED PLAYS BY YUAN MASTERS:
A COMPARISON WITH HIS BANTER ABOUT LYRICS

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In the late 1550s and 1560s, the mid-Ming literatus Li Kaixian 李開先 (1502–1568) became particularly interested in printing Yuan dynasty qu 曲 (literally “songs,” including both sanqu 散曲 and drama) and was involved in a number of projects. Li’s interest in these publishing projects was supported by his own stupendous book collection, which he claimed exceeded ten thousand juan. The thirty existing Yuan-dynasty editions of Yuan plays, which have been critical to our understanding of the textual transmission of zaju 雜劇, are also believed to have been part of Li’s collection at one time.


2 Li proudly named his library the “Library of Ten Thousand Fascicles,” and made it clear that the actual size of his book collection exceeded ten thousand juan. He also added that this particular library only held books on the classics and statecraft, and that he kept books on other subjects elsewhere. See Li Kaixian, “Cangshu wanjuan lou ji” 藏書萬卷樓記 (On the Library of Ten Thousand Fascicles), in Li Kaixian quanji 李開先全集, ed. Bu Jian (Complete Works of Li Kaixian, hereafter LKXQJ) (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2004), 826.


For a comprehensive discussion of the various editions of Yuan drama and the
From his collection of Yuan drama, it was known that Li Kaixian had printed a number of the plays in an anthology titled *Gaiding Yuanxian chuanqi* 改定元賢傳奇 (Revised Plays by Yuan Masters, hereafter *GDYXCQ*):

Now, the poems and prose of the Han and Tang dynasties cover and fill the entire world, and the various books of Song Neo-Confucianism are also widely transmitted, but Yuan songs are rarely seen. What we see are often just ordinary works, or the remains of rouge and powder. For example, Wang Shifu 王實甫 is not the greatest among the writers of the Yuan dynasty; *Xixiang ji* 西廂記 (The Story of the Western Chamber) is also not the most outstanding among his writings throughout his lifetime. Yet now, even the ladies and young girls can quote his verses. Does this not show that in human life, there is fortune and misfortune? Anthologies such as *Erduan jin* 二段錦 (Two Pieces of Brocade), *Siduan jin* 四段錦 (Four Pieces of Brocade), *Shiduan jin* 十段錦 (Ten Pieces of Brocade), *Baiduan jin* 百段錦 (A Hundred Pieces of Brocade), *Qianduan jin* 千段錦 (A Thousand Pieces of Brocade), and *Qianjia jin* 千家錦 (Brocade of a Thousand Households) include both good and bad, and are all mixed up without proper order. The anthologies of short songs and song suites are also mostly like these. I regarded this as a shortcoming, and I wished that people in this age would get to see the Yuan-dynasty songs and realize how the Yuan songs have achieved their reputation. Thus I disclosed completely the more than one thousand copies that I keep, and gave them to my disciple Zhang Zishen 張自慎 (courtesy name Cheng’an 誠菴) to choose. Only fifty were selected. It was beyond my ability to put all of them into print, so from these, we made a further selection of sixteen. We deleted superfluous sections to make the texts simple and concise, changed the rhymes and corrected the sounds. Wherever a tune did not fit, a line was not proper, or the dialogues were not to the point and too vague, we edited and corrected all of them. We even wrote some passages on behalf of the original authors. Therefore, we named this publication *Revised Plays by Yuan Masters*.4

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